

CHAPTER 10.2

Islam Expands

KEY IDEA In spite of internal conflicts, the Muslims created an empire of land on three continents.

When Muhammad died, his followers elected a new leader, Abu-Bakr. He had been loyal to Muhammad. He was given the title caliph, which means “successor” or “deputy.”

Abu-Bakr reacted quickly when a group of Arabs abandoned Islam. He defeated them in battle over a two-year period. Abu-Bakr died soon thereafter. However, his army became an effective fighting force that began to conquer new lands. The Arabs took Syria and lower Egypt from the Byzantine Empire. By 750, the Muslim Empire stretched from the Indus River in India west to the Atlantic Ocean.

The Muslims’ faith helped them achieve this rapid expansion. They saw each victory as a sign of Allah’s support of Islam. Other factors were the fighting skill of the armies and the strong leadership of their generals. The Byzantine and Sassanid empires to the north were also weak at this time, and the Arabs took advantage of that. Finally, many people who lived in those empires did not support the official religions. They often supported the Arabs, who they thought would liberate them from the harsh rule of these empires.

Many of these people accepted Islam. Some found the message of Islam appealing. Some liked the fact that by becoming Muslims they avoided paying a tax put only on non-Muslims. The Qur’an prevented Muslims from forcing others to accept the religion, however. Muslim rulers allowed people to follow whatever beliefs they chose.

After the murder of a ruling caliph in 656, different Muslim groups began to struggle for control of the empire. Ali, a cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, was chosen caliph. After a few years, he, too, was killed. The system of electing caliphs died with him.

A family known as the Umayyads took power

over the vast empire. They did not follow the simple life of earlier caliphs and surrounded themselves with wealth. This created a division within the Muslim community.

Most Muslims accepted Umayyad rule. However, some did resist, and a different view of the office of caliph developed. The Shi’a group—the “party” of the deceased Ali—felt that caliphs needed to be relatives of Muhammad. Those who did not outwardly resist Umayyad rule became known as the Sunni. Another group, the Sufi, reacted to the Umayyads’ life of luxury. The Sufis emphasized a more spiritual way of life.

After 750, Muslim caliphates existed on three continents. The Abbasids (750–1258) conquered the Umayyads and took over the east. They held the lands of modern Iraq, Iran, and central Asia. They built the city of Baghdad in central Iraq as their capital. They were powerful, using their location to control the rich trade between China and Europe. They formed a complex government to run their empire.

One Umayyad prince had escaped to Spain in 750. There Muslims known as Berbers already existed. The prince set up a Muslim state called al-Andalus. The Umayyads of al-Andalus (756–976) controlled parts of Spain and North Africa.

Another Muslim state—the Fatimid caliphate (909–1171)—sprang up in North Africa. It eventually spread to western Arabia and Syria.

The Muslims were divided politically. However, the Abbasids, Umayyads of al-Andalus, and Fatimids were linked by religion, language, culture, and trade. Muslim traders brought goods from China to Spain. They formed banks along the route. They also accepted a form of substitute money later known as checks.

Why Did Islam Spread So Quickly?

In 610 CE, a merchant trader from Mecca made one of his frequent visits to a cave on nearby Mount Hira. For Muhammad ibn Abdallah it was a time to pray, to get away from the scramble for money and wealth he felt was causing his people to lose their way. According to Muhammad, it was on this visit to Mt. Hira that the archangel Gabriel squeezed him hard and caused words to flow from his mouth. The words said that **Allah** was the one God. No doubt a bit shaken, Muhammad reported the event to his wife and her cousin but otherwise stayed silent. The words continued to come.

In 610 Mecca was a bustling Arabian trade town with camel caravans arriving regularly from points north and south. It was also the site of an annual pilgrimage where Arab pagans came to perform rituals at the sacred **Ka'ba** (the holy shrine in Mecca). The Meccan population included a number of Jewish families and some Christians. There may have been a feeling among the pagan Arabs that their religious world was less sophisticated than that of the Jews and the Christians. They had nothing to match the Torah and the Bible. They had no Abraham or Moses or Jesus. But all that was about to change.

After receiving Allah's words for two years, Muhammad decided it was time to talk. Encouraged by the support of close friends and his wife, Kadija, Muhammad began to recite the received words in public. He spoke of the one god, Allah, and the importance of charity – sharing wealth with the weak and poor. Together these teachings would be given the name **Islam**, the Arabic word for “submission.” A follower of Islam was to be called a Muslim, meaning one “who submits to the will of Allah.” After

Muhammad's death in 632, Allah's words that Muhammad was reciting would be written down and called the **Qur'an**.

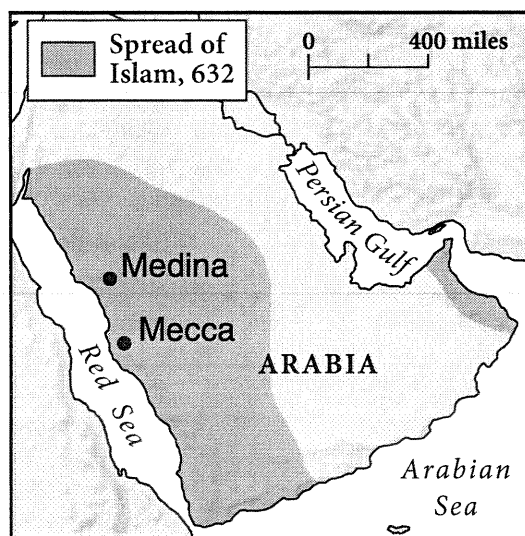
At first, many in Mecca resisted Muhammad's preaching. What would happen to idol worship? Surely pilgrimages to Mecca would stop. Business would suffer. By 622 resistance was so strong that Muhammad decided to leave. Together with 70 families, he migrated 250 miles north. There, in the town of Medina, he established a new base. He also made a symbolic break with the past. Muham-

mad had respect for Jews and Christians, “people of the Book,” as he called them. However, at a prayer session in 624, Muhammad symbolically turned his body to the south – away from Jerusalem and toward Mecca. It was as much as saying that a new religion had been born.

In 628, Muhammad made the hard decision to return to Mecca. Despite

opposition, he was allowed back in the city. He soon had enough support to order that the idols in the Ka'ba be destroyed and the shrine dedicated to Allah. Pilgrimages to the Ka'ba became one of the Five Pillars, or essential duties, of Islam. These duties – confession of belief, prayer five times a day, **Ramadan**, an annual month-long fast, giving alms to the poor, and the pilgrimage to Mecca – would become the bedrock practices of Islam.

From this modest beginning in west-central Arabia, Islam exploded in size. Within 100 years of Muhammad's death, it had reached Europe and Asia. The question before us is why. Examine the documents that follow and answer the question: *Why did Islam spread so quickly?*



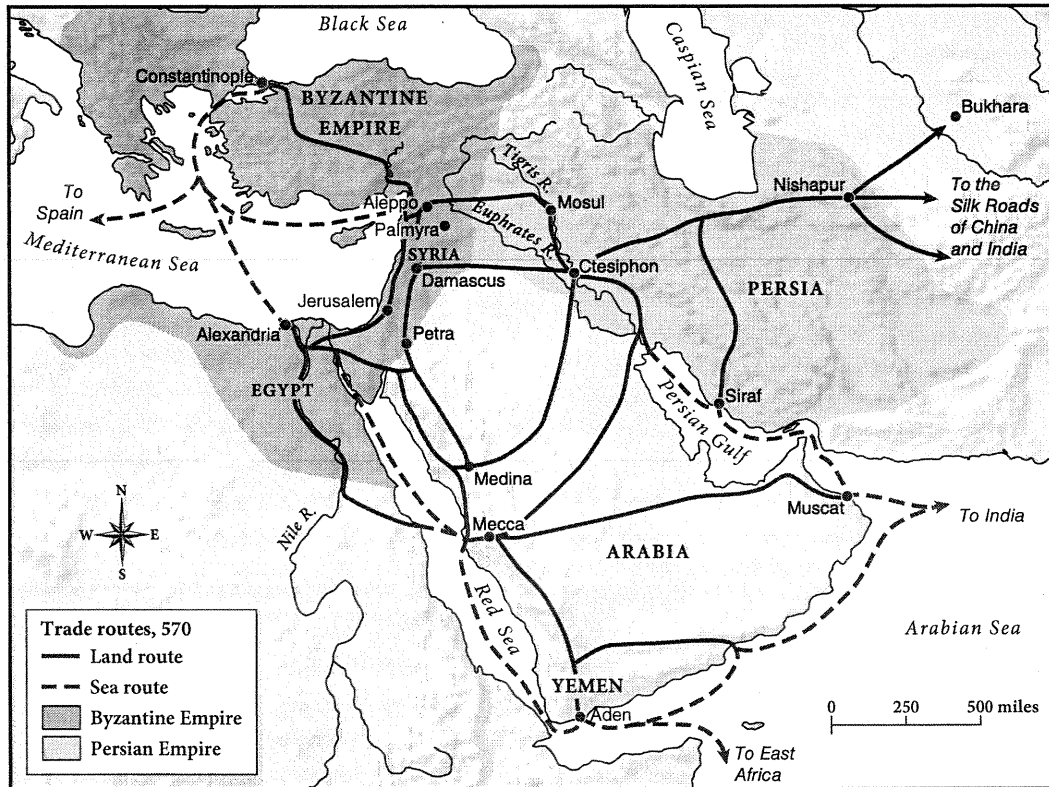
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Document A

Sources: Desmond Stewart and the Editors of Time-Life Books, *Great Ages of Man: Early Islam*, Time-Life Books, 1967.
Map created from various sources.

By the middle of the sixth century ... Mecca was ... prosperous and important. First, it was at the crossroads of the lucrative caravan trade. Vast camel trains, bearing spices, perfumes, precious metals, ivory and silk, filed through the town, headed north on the way from Yemen ... to the markets of Syria, and headed east from the Red Sea across the desert to Iraq. Adding to the profits from caravans was a brisk pilgrimage trade, for Mecca was the site of Arabia's holiest pagan shrine [the Ka'ba].

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Document B

Source: Verses from the Qur'an.

Those who submit to God and accept the true Faith; who are devout, sincere, patient, humble, charitable, and chaste; who fast and are ever mindful of God – on these, both men and women, God will bestow forgiveness and rich recompense [reward]. (33:35)

... (W)hoever killed a human being, except as punishment for murder or other villainy..., shall be deemed as having killed all mankind; and ... whoever saved a human life shall be deemed as having saved all mankind.... (5:32)

But the believers who do good works, both men and women, shall enter Paradise. They shall not suffer the least injustice. (4:124)

Do not devour one another's property by unjust means, nor bribe the judges with it in order that you may wrongfully and knowingly usurp [take] other people's possessions.... (2:188)

Permission to take up arms is hereby given to those who are attacked, because they have been wronged. God has power to grant them victory. (22:39)

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